

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07422-3 - Passages of a Working Life During Half a Century: With a Prelude  
of Early Reminiscences: Volume 1

Charles Knight

Excerpt

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EARLY REMINISCENCES.

—  
A Prelude.

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## PASSAGES, &c.

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### EARLY REMINISCENCES: A PRELUDE.

#### SECTION I.



ON the night of the thirty-first of December, 1800, I had gone to bed with a vague fear that I should be awakened by a terrific noise which would shake the house more than the loudest thunder-clap, and would produce such a concussion of the air as would break every window-pane in Windsor town. The house in which my father lived, and in which I was born, was close to the great entrance to the lower ward of Windsor Castle, called, after its builder, Henry the Eighth's gateway. I crept down in the dawning of that first day of the year to a sitting room which commanded a view of the Round Tower. The aspect of that room was eastern. I watched the gradual reddening of the sky; and I momentarily expected to see a flash from one of the many cannon mounted on the Tower, and to hear that roar from those mighty pieces of ordnance which was to produce such alarming consequences. I knew not then that these guns were only four-pounders, and that if all the seventeen had been fired at once the windows would most probably have been safe. I watched and watched till the sun was high. It was

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then reported that the King had ordered there should be no discharge of the cannon of the keep, for the new painted window by Mr. West, at the east end of St. George's Chapel, might be broken by the concussion. There was no boom of artillery ; but the bells of the belfry of St. George's Chapel and the bells of the parish church rang out a merry peal—not so much to welcome the coming of the new year and beginning of the new century (for the learned had settled, after a vast deal of popular controversy, that the century had its beginning on the 1st of January, 1801, and not on the 1st of January, 1800), but to hail the legal commencement of the Union with Ireland. The sun shone brilliantly on a *new* standard on the Round Tower. I had often looked admiringly upon the old standard, tattered and dingy as it sometimes was ; but I now beheld that this new standard was not only perfect in its shape and bright in its colours, but was wholly of an unaccustomed pattern. There were the arms of England in the first and fourth quarterings ; the arms of Scotland in the second quartering ; and the arms of Ireland in the third. But where had vanished the *fleur-de-lys* ? Was his gracious majesty no longer King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, as his style had run in all legal instruments in the memory of man, and a good deal beyond ? The newspapers said he was now to be styled “ George the Third, by the grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith.” The good folks of Windsor argued that the change was ominous of the departing glory of Old England.

It is not to be supposed that I knew much of such matters in this tenth year of my life ; but,

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nevertheless, I knew something of what was going on in my little world of Windsor, in connexion with the doings of the great world beyond the favoured home of the king. I was the only child of a widowed father; his companion in his few leisure hours; the object of his incessant sollicitude. I cannot remember myself as I was painted at two years old, in a white frock with a black sash—the indication that I had lost my mother. She was, as I was told by those who knew her and loved her, a most amiable woman, whose society my father had enjoyed only for a few years—the daughter of a wealthy yeoman, of Iver, in Buckinghamshire. The “yeoman” of those days, although a landed proprietor, did not aspire to be called “esquire.” He would now be recognised as “gentleman-farmer.” My white frock and black sash had given place to jacket and trowsers. But still I can call to remembrance the unjoyous head of the desolate household; his passionate caresses of his boy; his long fits of gloom and silence. We had little talk of childish things. Of his own childhood he never spake to me. I came to know, in after years, that he had been brought up by his relative, the Rev. James Hampton, who subsequently earned an honourable fame as the translator of Polybius. This learned man died in 1778. In 1780, my father was settled at Windsor; for I have heard him relate with some complacency how he had asserted his political independence, by voting for Admiral Keppel in that year; “though,” according to Horace Walpole, “all the royal bakers, and brewers, and butchers voted against him.” My father had qualified himself for his trade of a bookseller, by his experience in the house of ——— Hors-

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field, the successor of the Knaptons, both of which publishers were very eminent in their day. He had moreover a taste for literary composition, which he professionally indulged in the useful labour of compiling a little work which held its place in many editions for half a century as "The Windsor Guide." I find copper-plate views accompanying this handbook which bear the inscription: "Published as the Act directs by Charles Knight, Windsor, March 31st, 1785." In 1786 and 1787 he published the first celebrated periodical written by Etonians. I possess an interesting document, being the receipt to Charles Knight for fifty guineas "in full for the copyright of 'The Microcosm,' a periodical work carried on by us, the undermentioned persons, under the name and title of Gregory Griffin. Received for John Smith, Robert Smith, John Frere, and self, George Canning." Of this school-boys' production, remarkable for its intrinsic merits, but more so for the subsequent eminence of its writers, Canning was the working Editor. He was thus brought into friendly communication with my father. It was not only when the brilliant supporter of Pitt was rising into political importance, but when he had taken his place among the foremost men of his time, that he had a kindly feeling towards his first publisher, often calling upon him with a cordial greeting when he visited Windsor.

As I recollect my father when I was a child of seven or eight years, he was much occupied by his business, for he had become a printer in addition to his trade of stationer and bookseller. A considerable portion of his time was also spent on public affairs, first of the Parish, and then of the Corporation. I

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was left much to myself, except when I listened to the old-world stories of the faithful servant to whose charge I was committed by my dying mother—how like she was to the Peggotty of Dickens! It was fortunate, therefore, that I acquired very early a taste for reading. I had access to a large collection of books, and I quickly found abundant consolation for my solitary hours in that reading which, somewhat unwisely I think, has now been supplanted by what is held to be directly instructive. To the child, *Robinson Crusoe* is, happily, not a sealed book in an educational age; but the “Seven Champions of Christendom,” the “Arabian Nights,” the “Arabian Tales,” with their wonders of the “Dom Daniel” (which, looking back upon, seem to me to have as much poetry in them as “Thalaba”), the “Tales of the Genii,” “Gulliver’s Travels,” “Philip Quarll,” “Peter Wilkins,” and a dozen others, now vanished, were not then superseded, either in their original seductions or in safer abridgments, by the tamer fictions in which moral and religious truths are inculcated. My avidity for reading, and, perhaps, the dangerous locality in which I lived—an open sewer from the Castle creeping at the back of my father’s house—made my constitution feeble; and the feebleness ended in typhoid fever. I recovered slowly, and was taken for the establishment of my health to a farm which was tenanted by the father of my good nurse. I have described what was the life of a small farmer when I was playing at “Farmer’s Boy” at Warfield—one of the parishes comprised in Windsor Forest.\* My host was a

\* “Once upon a Time.”—The Farmer’s Kitchen.

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shrewd Yorkshireman, from whom I learnt more than I could have obtained from many books. He was a tenant on the Walsh estate, having been placed in this farm as a reward for his faithful service with the Governor of Pennsylvania, Sir John Walsh, before the War of Independence. He would discourse to me of the wonderful man who drew lightning from the skies—the friend of his own scientific master (whose papers about the Torpedo and other curious matters may be read in the *Philosophical Transactions*), and he told how Benjamin Franklin became a great instrument in accomplishing that change which had separated the American States from their parent country. He would relate to me incidents of the war about taxing the colonists, speaking rather from the revolutionist than the loyal point of view. Altogether, a plain good man of simple habits and large intelligence. He and his bustling wife lived in the usual style of the southern farmer of the days of Arthur Young, before he was pampered by war-prices into luxury and display. The greater war-time of the French Revolution had in twenty years extinguished much of the immediate interest of the half-forgotten era of the American war. My experienced friend would make the stirring passing events of the week known to his household, in reading aloud the “*Reading Mercury*,” which was duly delivered at his door by an old newsman on a shambling pony. How eagerly we looked for this messenger, whose budget would provide occupation for many a dull evening! Pitt and Fox, Nelson and Bonaparte, were familiar names. Dibdin’s songs had found their way to this solitary inland place. Invasion was a threat we



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despised ; for within a couple of miles of our farm was a summer-camp of regular soldiers. I have walked wonderingly through the lines of tents which stretched across the sandy plain near Swinley, and have lingered among the pickets till the evening gun warned us to move homeward. But our country had other protectors from our great enemy. It was satisfactory to learn, from a popular song which our ploughmen trolled out, that—

“Should their flat-bottoms in darkness come o’er,  
Our brave Volunteers would receive them on shore.”

There were, indeed, Volunteers before the close of the eighteenth century, and though they were somewhat disparagingly called “Loyal Associations,” as though they were not soldiers, I can bear my testimony that at Windsor in their blue coats, black belts, and round hats with a bear-skin over the crown, they looked very formidable, although perhaps not quite equal to suppress a riot for cheap bread.

My pleasant months at Brock Hill Farm came to an end ; and I went home to begin the dreary life of a day-school. Dreary, indeed, it was ; for the education was altogether rote-work ; without the slightest attempt to smooth over the difficulties that presented themselves in geographical names held together by no thread of description, and in rules of arithmetic, to be regularly worked through without the slightest endeavour to explain their *rationale*. The beginning of the century found me at this school. I was one of the few who learnt Latin and French. The same *émigré* of the Revolutionary times taught both tongues. I have no doubt his French accent was perfect ; but his Latin, if I may judge from the way

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in which he read the first line of the *Æneid*, was not the Latin of Eton "I do trow."

*"Arma veeromque cano, Trojæ quee preemus ab orees."*

My language-master was a pleasant gentlemanly person who hated England thoroughly. I have looked with him upon our illuminations of tallow candles for some naval victory, and have been dashed in my confident belief that our town guns, and our bells, and the "Reading Mercury" told the truth, when he assured me that this rejoicing was only a false pretence; that it was vain to expect that a trumpery island would ever be able to contend against France; and that assuredly George III. would soon resign Windsor Castle to the First Consul. Nevertheless, he prayed that he might not see the downfall of another monarchy.

The misery of the poor in my native town at the beginning of the century was sufficiently visible even to my childish apprehension. On an evening of the previous autumn, when I was returning homeward from a game in the Park, I heard the distant shouts of a multitude, and saw a furious mob gathering at the junction of the streets near the market-place. I got into the safety of my home not too soon, for the mob was coming towards the baker's shop that was next door. They had smashed the windows of several bakers in the lower part of the town. They believed, as the greater number of people everywhere believed, that the high price of corn was wholly occasioned by combinations of corn-factors, meal-men, millers, and bakers; and that if these oppressors of the nation could be compelled to bring their stores to market, there would be abundance and cheapness, and no